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Russian Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa: Disengagement or Cooperation?

Summary

After several decades of expanding involvement and influence in Africa, the Soviet Union disengaged from the continent in the 1980s as part of the global retrenchment associated with Gorbachev's domestic economic reforms and "new thinking" in foreign and security policy. After the collapse of the Soviet state Russia continued its retreat from Africa. In 1994, however, Moscow began to reassess the implications of this withdrawal and announced its interest in reestablishing ties with the countries of the continent - ties that would focus on mutually beneficial economic relations. However, the poor financial situation of many African states will likely impede the implementation of Russia's plans for expanded economic involvement. Moreover, Russian political involvement is likely to remain limited, given the centrality of Russia's political and economic problems at home and in the "near abroad."

The Collapse of Soviet African Policy in the 1980s

From the beginning of the Cold War the most fundamental factor that motivated Soviet policy in Africa, as well as in other regions of the Third World, was the global competition for influence with the United States. Indeed, immediately after the decision to abandon Stalin's Eurocentric policy orientation in the mid-1950s the Soviets took a steady course in attempting to expand their involvement, influence, and power projection capabilities on the African continent.¹ Relatively limited in the 1960s, Soviet influence in Africa was substantially strengthened in the 1970s, especially in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and other self-proclaimed Marxist states. Soviet support proved to be essential in either bringing to power or consolidating

¹ See, for example, Roger E. Kanet, "Security Issues in Soviet African Policy: The Imperatives of Soviet Security Policy in Soviet-African Relations," *Crossroads: An International Socio-Political Journal*, no. 10 (1983), pp. 81-120.

a number of African regimes that were friendly toward and dependent upon the USSR. In Angola and Ethiopia, the Soviet Union demonstrated the capability of providing allies with significant military assistance and proved that this assistance could be adequate to change the local balance of power in favor of the recipients of Soviet support. In return, the Soviets acquired access to naval and air facilities that might prove to be useful in potential conflicts with the West.¹

The Soviet successes of the 1970s, however, were not followed by comparable gains in the following decade.² For Moscow the 1980s were characterized by a significant decline in its relations with Africa, even with some of its closest Marxist-Leninist allies. Besides the growing concern about the drain on the Soviet economy resulting from costly ideologically-motivated commitments to African and other Third World clients, the initial triumph of national liberation movements in coming to power was followed by their largely unsuccessful efforts to create and consolidate viable political-economic systems. Rather than representing the ongoing attraction of Soviet-oriented communism, as had been claimed, these regimes were a growing drain on Soviet economic and military resources. Numerous studies have shown that Soviet decision-makers in the 1980s were increasingly concerned with the staggering costs of maintaining their "empire" and providing economic, as well as military, assistance to their weak and unstable allies.³ It is essential to recall that the growing costs of the Soviet overseas empire occurred precisely at the time that the Soviet economy had begun to suffer from falling economic growth rates.⁴ As a result, Moscow eventually reneged on many of its African commitments and disengaged from the continent in favor of the development of its own economy and of ameliorating its relations with the West which was seen as the only source of the technology and investment capital required by for Soviet economic rejuvenation.⁵

Thus, in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence, when the declining superpower was plagued by a rapidly deepening economic crisis and the Cold War was coming to an end, Africa was widely perceived by the Soviet political elite as a region of peripheral importance. Many established ties were curtailed or even eliminated, as the costly ideological foundation of Soviet relations with African states was replaced by pragmatic cost-benefit calculations. In the words of one Russian specialist on Africa, Mikhail Gorbachev with his emphasis on "new thinking" presided over the "collapse" of the USSR's African policy.⁶

Russia's Disengagement from Africa

The policy of disengagement from the African continent continued after the Soviet Union's disintegration in December 1991. Such a development was not surprising since the same economic problems that forced communists to relinquish their external empire persisted and intensified in the democratizing Russian Federation. Indeed, numerous vehement debates about how to extricate the Russian Federation from the ongoing economic crisis revealed a striking similarity between otherwise unreconcilable positions - almost all experts agreed that Russia's domestic economic misfortunes had been greatly exacerbated, if not caused, by Moscow's extremely costly ties with the Third World, and especially with Africa.⁷

Based on such a virtual consensus among his advisors, Russian President Boris Yeltsin's initial policy towards Africa did nothing to stop the continuation of the massive Soviet retreat from the continent. Thus, for example, two months after Foreign Minister's tour of Africa in February 1992 Moscow closed Russian embassies in nine African countries - Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia, Niger, Sao-Tome and Principe, Togo, Somalia, and Sierra Leone. Shortly afterwards, consulates in Mozambique, Angola,

¹ For a discussion of the importance of basing rights in Soviet Third World Policy, see Robert E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy* (New York: Pergamon, 1982), especially pp. 173-204, 233-9.

² See Roger E. Kanet, "The Evolution of Soviet Policy toward the Developing World from Stalin to Brezhnev," in Edward A. Kolodziej and Roger E. Kanet, eds., *The Limits of Soviet Power in the Developing World: Thermidor in the Revolutionary Struggle* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 36-60.

³ See, for example, Daniel R. Kempton and Roger E. Kanet, "Soviet Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Prospects and Problems for Model and Ally Strategies," in Jane Shapiro Zacek, ed., *The Gorbachev Generation: Issues in Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York: Paragon Press, 1988), pp. 179-224.

⁴ A group of US analysts estimated that the costs of Soviet empire (including subsidies to African allies) had reached somewhere between \$35 billion and \$46 billion annually by 1980. Cited in Kanet, "The Evolution of Soviet Policy toward the Developing World from Stalin to Brezhnev," p. 56.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, "Gorbachev and the Third World," *Foreign Affairs*, LXIV (1986), pp. 715-731.

⁶ A. Kiva, "Afrika: i zdes zanovo?" *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, no. 21 (May 29, 1991). Cited in Robert G. Patman, "Russia's New Agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Peter Shearman, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 285.

⁷ See Grigori Karassin, "Russia and Africa," *International Affairs*, no. 1 (January 1993), pp. 52-60.

Madagascar, and the Congo were also closed.¹

It is important to note that, unlike such countries as France and Britain that possess a wide network of diversified cultural and economic contacts with African nations, the Russian Federation could not close down its official missions there without significant political costs. As emphasized by Grigori Karassin, Chief of the Department of Africa of the Russian Ministry of International Relations, besides the remaining embassies and some trade missions, the Russian Federation currently does not have in Africa "any additional receptors to perceive the processes taking place there, to say nothing of having a foothold for the establishment of a new structure of cooperation."²

Moreover, it was not only political and military cooperation between Russia and African states that was drastically curtailed; many economic ties were also cut. Thus, while in 1992 the amount of Russian trade with Africa exceeded \$1 billion, in 1993 it declined to \$ 760 million. Furthermore, according to Russia's Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, the pattern of Russian trade with the continent has been severely distorted, with 83% of Russian-African commercial flows confined to the few countries of Northern Africa.³

Worried about the process of shrinking cooperation, four African ambassadors (from Senegal, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar) accredited in Moscow made a deliberate effort to seek assurances from Moscow authorities that Russia was not "turning away from Africa."⁴ It appears, however, that, despite such calls for a more active engagement, Russian foreign policy towards Africa in the first few years after the Soviet Union's collapse was characterized by a massive retreat in the political, military, and economic realms. In fact, in the monetary area Russia undermined its standing in Africa by cutting off all economic assistance to African recipients and demanding the immediate repayment of their outstanding debt by African states.⁵

Russia Returns to Africa?

And yet, even as the Russians were withdrawing from the continent, they also made evident their interest in the long-term prospects for beneficial commercial relations with the countries of Southern Africa. By 1994 Moscow's attitude towards the African continent experienced a major shift. Reassessing the prospects for cooperation with African nations and realizing the far-reaching strategic losses associated with the policy of complete disengagement from the region, Russian decision-makers have begun to voice discontent with the abrupt deterioration of ties with Africa. It has been repeatedly argued that, in contrast with the previous era of unilateral assistance which was driven by ideological concerns and the dynamics of the superpower rivalry, new Russian-African relations should be mutually beneficial and based on pragmatic interests.

Among the important events that accelerated this shift in Russian perceptions of Africa was a conference of Russian ambassadors to African countries held in Moscow in summer 1994. Addressing the conference, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin emphasized the fact that the prolonged pause in relations with Africa had had an adverse impact on Russia's interests. Being remarkably explicit about Moscow's pragmatic goals on the African continent, in particular in the area of arms trade, he noted that "the resulting vacuum is being actively filled by other countries, including those that make Russian weapons under license and of a quality nowhere near that offered by our producers."⁶ Expressing essentially the same concern, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was more cautious, however. Thus, in his speech at the conference, Kozyrev talked about the need to "combine organically" the expansion of Russian arms sales with the enhancement of international security on the African continent.⁷

Although military cooperation between Moscow and Africa has deteriorated substantially over the last decade and the Russian Federation has to start virtually from scratch, there is a large number of factors that are remain conducive to the sale of Russian arms in Africa. Most importantly, about 60%, and in some cases

¹ Robert Patman, "Russia's New Agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa," p. 292.

² Grigori Karassin, "Russia and Africa," p. 59.

³ Cited in Vladimir Abarinov, "Novii afrikanskii kurs: vzyskat' nedoimku i razvernut' eksport oruzhiya," *Segodnya* (22 July, 1994).

⁴ *Izvestiia* (November 10, 1992).

⁵ Moscow Radio World Service (January 24, 1993); cited in Patman, "Russia's New Agenda in Sub-Saharan Africa," p. 292; *Izvestiia* (March 7, 1992).

⁶ ITAR-TASS (July 12, 1994).

⁷ Abarinov, "Novii afrikanskii kurs."

almost 90%, of military equipment currently used by African armies was manufactured in Russia.¹ According to Chernomyrdin, there existed an imperative to "step up activity and efficiency" in moving Russian weaponry into the African market without forgetting, however, about the actual needs of the clients and their ability to pay.² However, efforts to reestablish Russian arms exports have faced several severe problems - including the reduced capacity of African states to pay for weapons imports and the competition with both Western and CIS weapons exporters.³ The most promising market for Russian military exports is South Africa, which has been interested in purchasing MiG 19 engines.⁴

In fact, the poor financial status of many African nations may substantially impede Russia's plans for expanding economic involvement in the region even beyond the area of military sales. The problem is complicated by the existing indebtedness of African countries to the former USSR (and now to Russia) - in 1993 sub-Saharan nations alone owed Moscow about \$19 billion.⁵ It is clear that the majority of African nations will not be able to repay all their debts to the Russian Federation. And yet, Russia remains quite persistent in trying to convert Africa's debt into direct investments or to use it to cover the costs of Russian official missions on the continent.

Confronted with serious debt repayment problems, Moscow is focusing its attention primarily on the most economically capable countries of the region that either extract oil (e.g., Nigeria) or supply important raw resources (e.g., Zimbabwe). According to Russian decision-makers, however, their most important economic partner on the continent is South Africa. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in February 1992, Russia has repeatedly expressed its interest in cooperating with the South African Republic which possesses the largest economic and commercial potential in the region. The prospects for cooperation between the two countries are indeed bright. For example, it has been noted many times that, if Russia and South Africa coordinate their policies, they will be in a position to shape world prices on diamonds and, to a substantial degree, on gold.⁶ Moreover, Russian leaders have seen South Africa as an alternative source of food and feed grains. In 1994 Russian President Boris Yeltsin revoked all restrictions on cooperation with South Africa which had been imposed some time ago following a UN Security Council resolution. Moreover, in his decree Yeltsin specifically encouraged the formation of all state, public, and private ties with the South African Republic on the mutually advantageous basis.⁷

Despite the plans for more active economic cooperation with African nations, Russia has been quite reluctant, however, to involve itself politically and militarily in settling the ongoing conflicts in the region. Although President Yeltsin has announced on a number of occasions that "as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and an active participant in the international community, the Russian Federation supports democratic transformations in Africa and turning it into a zone of peace, calm and stable economic development," so far Russia, facing political, economic, and security problems of its own, has refrained from making any specific commitments to preserving peace and stability on the African continent.⁸ In the words of one Russian expert, "they [Africans] should understand that Russia has to bear practically alone the burden of peacekeeping in the Commonwealth of Independent States."⁹

The Future of Russian-African Relations

Given the recent shift of Russian policy towards Africa, it is reasonable to assume that Russia will be quite active in attempting to reestablish its economic presence on the African continent. This time, however, such a presence will be driven by purely pragmatic calculations rather than by some ideological imperative. Such a trend will certainly continue to cause feelings of discontent among Moscow's former Marxist-Leninist

¹ Vyacheslav Elagin, "Nam ne stoit teriat' Afriku," *Krasnaya Zvezda* (August 8, 1994).

² ITAR-TASS (12 July 1994).

³ Interfax, August 11, 1992; translated in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Sov-92-158.

⁴ *Krasnaya zvezda*, December 15, 1993.

⁵ Elagin, "Nam ne stoit teriat' Afriku."

⁶ Maxim Yusin, "Rossiyskaya diplomatiia otkryvaet dlia sebia Yuzhnuu Afriku," *Izvestiia* (March 4, 1992). In 1992 the De Beers company opened an office in Moscow; although problems of Russian-South African competition in the area of diamond and gold exports were reported, by early 1994 efforts seem successful in reaching an agreement. See "Moscow Visit Alerts Diamond World," *Africa Analysis* (September 4, 1992), p. 11; ITAR-TASS, April 26, 1993.

⁷ Radio Russia (July 12, 1994); Russia established a center for Russian studies in Capetown in 1994. See Zurab Nalbandian, "Moskva s vidom na Antarktidu," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, (September 1, 1994).

⁸ ITAR-TASS (July 12, 1994).

⁹ Elagin, "Nam ne stoit teriat' Afriku."

allies in Africa who had become accustomed to soft credits and easy loans. And yet, the ability to break with ideological rigidities of the past also creates the opportunity for Russia to establish mutually beneficial contacts with more financially secure, market-oriented African economies, such as that in South Africa.

Political involvement of the Russian Federation on the African continent is likely to remain limited, however. Preoccupied with numerous security problems in the "near abroad" and socio-economic misfortunes at home, Russia, at least in the near future, will not be able to claim the role of the major player in African politics. Nevertheless, if successful, Russia's increasing economic activities in Africa, in particular in the area of arms trade, will eventually form a basis on which Moscow can potentially re-assert its political power on the continent.

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